

# Investigating How Student Perceptions of Discussion Class Change During the Spring Semester

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes an investigation that sought to ascertain students' perceptions about the activities that comprise an English Discussion Class (EDC) lesson. A questionnaire was issued at the beginning of the first lesson in order to establish the students' pre-conceptions regarding the anticipated levels of difficulty, enjoyment, and usefulness of the various speaking and listening tasks. A second questionnaire was issued during the last lesson of the semester to find out to what extent the students' ideas had changed. Results indicated that in all cases activities had been less difficult, more enjoyable, and more useful than had been anticipated. The vast majority of students indicated that they felt both their fluency and confidence when speaking English had improved during the course of the fourteen-lesson semester.

## INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class is for students to develop their spoken fluency (Doe, 2014). Having gone through the Japanese education system, all students have studied English formally for a minimum of six years at junior high and high school. However, it is well known that the focus in those schools tends to be on developing grammar, writing, reading, and to some extent listening skills. These are the skills that are tested in academic entrance exams and, perhaps understandably, they are therefore prioritized in the public education system. However, the result is that many students have had limited opportunities to develop their speaking skills by the time they enter university. This leaves them underprepared for future occasions when they may actually need to speak English, whether for personal or professional reasons. Using the *communicative competence* framework (Canale, 1983), we can expect many freshman university students to be lacking in the sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic aspects, while they may be more proficient in terms of their linguistic competence, having studied grammar intensively over several years.

Japanese students are often all too aware of the deficiency in this aspect of their language ability, something that is compounded by the pervasive attitude in Japanese society that people somehow *should* be able to speak English, regardless of the fact that the education system is not set up in such a way as to facilitate this aim. Minoru Ike (1995) stated it succinctly when he said, "a dreamy, wishful desire to be able to speak English prevails throughout the country" (p.9). Indeed the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2003) stated its intention to cultivate 'Japanese with English abilities' more than a decade ago. Yet many feel the current situation falls a long way short of this, especially with regard to speaking skills.

The EDC course was established as a compulsory course for all freshmen students at Rikkyo in an attempt to address this imbalance. The purpose of this study was to compare the students' pre-conceptions with their later reflections regarding the kinds of activities that comprise an EDC lesson. A questionnaire was distributed at the very beginning of the first lesson of the Spring Semester, in order to ascertain the anticipated levels of difficulty, enjoyment, and usefulness of the various speaking and listening tasks. A second questionnaire was then issued during the last lesson of the semester to find out whether and to what extent the students' ideas had changed. Depending on the results, it would then be possible to see whether, at least from the students' point of view, the

course has succeeded in its aims of improving their fluency, as well as the subsidiary aims of improving confidence and reducing anxiety with regard to speaking English. These affective factors are crucial because they are closely linked to a student's *willingness to communicate* (Brown, 2007). It hardly needs to be stated how fundamental the willingness to engage in communication is in a course such as this.

This study's research questions, therefore, can be stated as:

- 1) To what extent do EDC students' perceptions of speaking and listening activities in class change during the Spring Semester?
- 2) Do the students feel their fluency and confidence with regard to speaking English has improved?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The author gave the questionnaire in class to all his students who attended the first and last lessons. This meant that 98 students received the first questionnaire, while 99 received the second, out of a possible total of 104. Because attendance was very high for both lessons, this ensured that a wide variety of students participated in the study. In terms of the students' ability level, 16 were Level One (the highest), 32 were Level Two, and 56 were Level Three. The author had no Level Four classes during the Spring Semester of 2014.

### Procedure

The questionnaires used in this study were designed to gather students' opinions on all of the activities commonly conducted in an EDC class (see Appendices A and B). These consist of: speaking English only for 90 minutes; talking in pairs; talking in small groups (of 3-5 students); speaking or answering a question in front of the whole class; speaking to a partner without stopping for 2-3 minutes (for fluency-building purposes); taking a speaking exam; listening to classmates speaking; and listening to the instructor speaking. They were written in both English and Japanese in order to reduce the risk of any misunderstanding, and also to encourage students to make the effort to answer honestly and thoughtfully. They were anonymous, also with the intention of encouraging frank responses.

The initial questionnaire was distributed at the very beginning of the first lesson. This was seen as essential, as the point was to ascertain students' *pre-conceptions* of the various activities. Had they experienced even one activity they would already have begun to form opinions about the class and the potential levels of difficulty, enjoyment etc. In truth they may already have begun to form such opinions to some extent, based on the appearance of the room, the demeanour of their classmates and the instructor etc. Nevertheless, every effort was made to ensure the questionnaire was completed at the earliest opportunity. The instructor did no more than request that it be filled out honestly. He then waited outside the classroom until the last questionnaire had been completed and placed in the envelope provided.

Specifically, the students were asked to decide how difficult, enjoyable, and useful they anticipated each activity would be. It was assumed that they would at least be familiar with the concept of each activity, with the possible exception of 'speaking to a partner without stopping for 2-3 minutes'. *Difficulty* and *enjoyment* levels were allocated a five-point scale, with a neutral option provided (e.g. 'neither difficult nor easy') in order to allow students to express their feelings, including ambivalence, as accurately as possible. *Usefulness*, however, was allocated only a four-point scale. It

was considered that something cannot be ‘neither useful nor not useful’ as by definition that would be ‘not useful’!

The follow-up questionnaire, distributed during the final lesson, followed a very similar format and was conducted under similar conditions, with the instructor encouraging honest responses before waiting outside. Administering it in the final lesson was seen as essential, as the students would have completed the final test and therefore be in a better position to reflect fully on the semester as a whole. However, the timing within that final lesson was not seen as of particular importance, other than making allowances for latecomers.

The content of the second questionnaire was very similar to the first, with students this time asked to *reflect* on how difficult, enjoyable, and useful they felt the various activities had actually been. Two additional questions were added however, in which students were asked to indicate whether they felt able to speak English more fluently, and with more confidence, than at the beginning of the semester. A four-point scale, with no neutral option, was adopted for these questions because it was felt students were unlikely to be ambivalent about such fundamental aspects of the course. Finally, a blank text box was included in the second questionnaire, in which students were invited to make any additional comments, either in English or Japanese.

## RESULTS

The first research question investigated the extent to which EDC students’ perceptions of speaking and listening activities changed during the Spring Semester, which was their first semester as university students.

In Figures 1 to 3 below, a score out of 5 (or 4 in the case of Figure 3) was obtained by first calculating the percentage of respondents who selected each answer, then weighting their answers accordingly. For example, ‘very difficult’ was given five times the weighting of ‘not difficult at all’, ‘a little difficult’ four times, etc. In each table, the bar on the left represents the first questionnaire, distributed in the first lesson; the bar on the right represents the second questionnaire, distributed in the final lesson. The labels on the horizontal axis correspond to the following activities, as stated in the actual questionnaires:

- *English only* - ‘Speaking English only for 90 minutes’
- *Pair work* - ‘Talking in pairs’
- *Group work* - ‘Talking in small groups (of 3-5 students)’
- *Whole class* - ‘Speaking or answering a question in front of the whole class’
- *Fluency* - ‘Speaking to a partner without stopping for 2-3 minutes’
- *Disc test* - ‘Doing a speaking exam’
- *Classmates* - ‘Listening to my classmates’
- *Teacher* - ‘Listening to my teacher’

As can be seen in the figures below, in all cases student responses indicate that activities had proven to be less difficult, more enjoyable, and more useful than had been anticipated before the course began.

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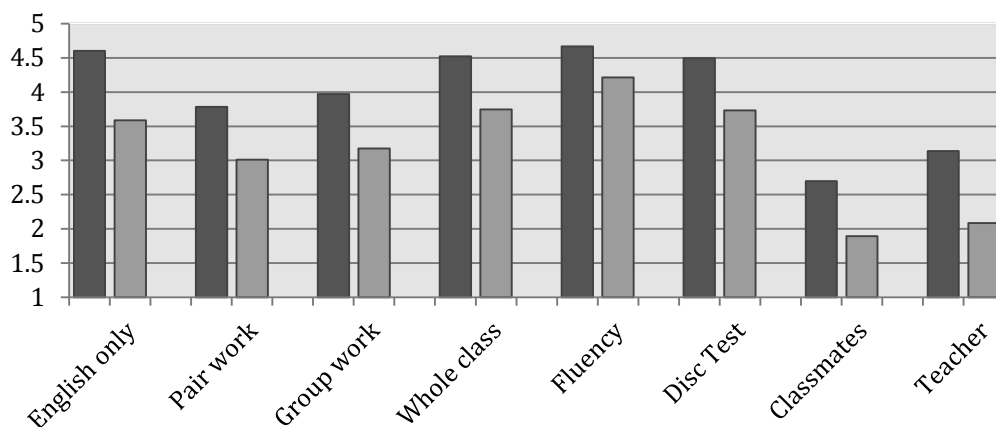


Figure 1. Comparison between anticipated and reported level of difficulty.

The biggest difference between anticipated and reported difficulty level was in ‘Listening to my teacher’, which dropped by more than a full point, from an average score of 3.136 to 2.06. This was closely followed by ‘Speaking English only for 90 minutes’, which also fell sharply from 4.6 to 3.589. The smallest change was in ‘Speaking to a partner without stopping for 2-3 minutes’ (the fluency-building activity), which fell from an average of 4.667 to 4.212. It had been expected to be the most difficult activity and had indeed turned out to be so. ‘Listening to my classmates’ had been anticipated to be the least difficult aspect of the lesson and was also found to be so.

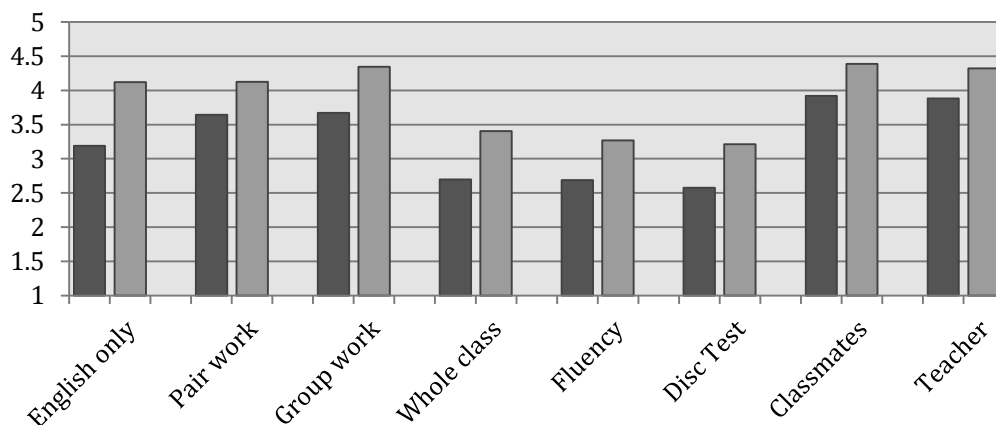


Figure 2. Comparison between anticipated and reported level of enjoyment.

In terms of students’ enjoyment of each activity, by far the biggest difference between anticipated and reported level was in ‘Speaking English only for 90 minutes’. This in fact rose by almost a full point, from an average score of 3.189 to 4.122. Perhaps unsurprisingly ‘Doing a speaking exam’ was expected to be the least enjoyable activity and proved to be so. However, the score for this also rose significantly, from 2.575 to 3.214. ‘Listening to my classmates’ had been anticipated to be the most enjoyable aspect of the lesson, which turned out to be the case.

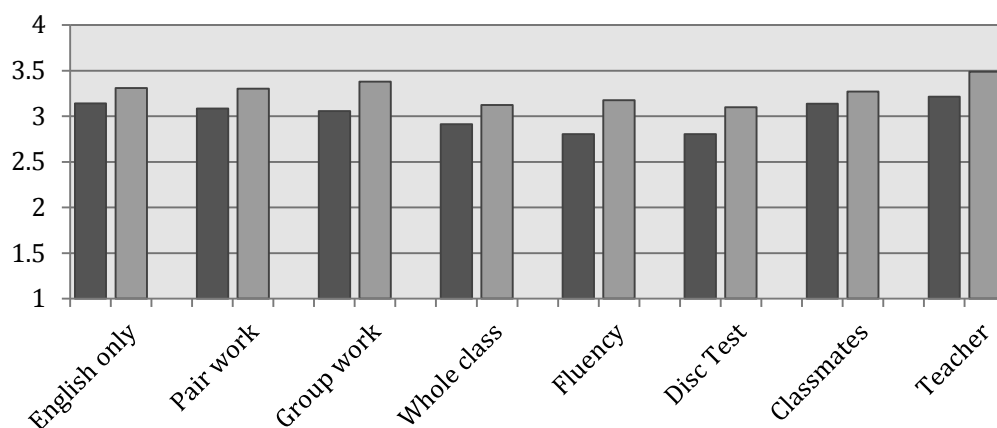


Figure 3. Comparison between anticipated and reported level of usefulness.

Although it can be seen that all activities in this category were perceived as more useful at the end of the semester than at the beginning, the changes were substantially less than for the other categories. The biggest change was in ‘Speaking to a partner without stopping for 2-3 minutes’, which grew from an average of 2.805 to 3.176. ‘Listening to my teacher’ had been anticipated to be the most useful and had indeed turned out to be so. However, ‘Doing a speaking exam’ had been expected to be the least useful, but in fact ‘Speaking or answering a question in front of the whole class’ was perceived as actually being the least useful activity at the end of the semester.

In order to compare the three main categories directly, an average score was calculated from all the activities (pair work, group work, etc.) Because the scores for *difficulty* and *enjoyment* were based on a five-point scale, while *usefulness* was based on a four-point scale, it was necessary to convert the average scores into percentages. Table 1 shows that the anticipated level of difficulty was highest, while enjoyment was the lowest. However, at the end of the semester usefulness was rated highest and difficulty had actually become the lowest. It is hardly surprising, then, that the biggest change (16.08%) between student expectations at the beginning of the semester and perceptions at the end was in the overall level of difficulty of classroom activities.

Table 1. Comparison of the Three Main Categories

	Difficulty	Enjoyment	Usefulness
Anticipated level (%)	79.68	65.58	75.30
Reported level (%)	63.60	77.98	81.70
Change (%)	16.08	12.40	6.40

The second research question investigated whether students felt their fluency and confidence had improved as a result of taking the EDC course during the Spring Semester. With regard to fluency, Figure 4 below shows that the vast majority of students responded in the affirmative. In fact a total of 90.9% said that they either agreed or strongly agreed that they could speak English more fluently

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than at the beginning of the course. Although a small number of students disagreed, no one indicated strong disagreement.

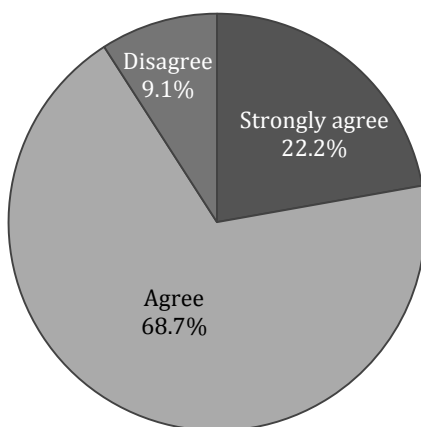


Figure 4. 'Do you feel you can speak English more fluently now?'

The overwhelming majority of students also responded positively when asked whether they felt more confident about speaking English than at the beginning of the course, as shown below in Figure 5. In fact 92.9% indicated either agreement or strong agreement.

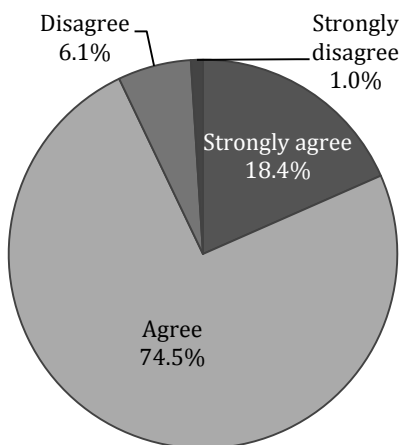


Figure 5. 'Do you feel more confident about speaking English now?'

## DISCUSSION

It is clear from these results that students perceived EDC lesson activities as less difficult, more enjoyable, and more useful than had been anticipated at the beginning of the semester. The fact that in terms of the students' *expectations*, difficulty rated the highest offers some insight into the

potential anxiety that many students have at the beginning of the course. This should act as a reminder to instructors of the importance of trying to lower student anxiety by creating a warm and friendly atmosphere in which students feel safe and relaxed about speaking English. It is reassuring to know, however, that the actual level of difficulty, as perceived by students at the end of the semester, dropped sharply (16.08% on average), representing the biggest change of all three main categories. It is also reassuring that the *idea* of speaking English for 90 minutes appeared far more difficult to students than the reality, as judged by their answers in the second questionnaire.

The fluency-building activity ('Speaking to a partner without stopping for 2-3 minutes') obtained the highest difficulty rating, both in terms of expectations and reality. This has pedagogical implications, as many EDC instructors (the author included) tend to start the lesson with this activity. However, if this activity is viewed as the most difficult, it may be worth considering moving it to a later part of the lesson, especially since one of the purposes of the first activity is to get students relaxed and motivated for the lesson (Brown, 2007).

The fact that activities in class were found to be less difficult than had been anticipated may be one reason why they were also perceived as significantly more enjoyable than had been expected (12.4% on average). This is an important finding since enjoyment and interest has long been recognized as one of the key elements of intrinsic learner motivation (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011). The biggest individual gain in this category was for 'Speaking English only for 90 minutes', which suggests that the students themselves may have been pleasantly surprised by their ability to sustain English-only activities for that length of time.

The gains in the *usefulness* category were more modest (6.4% on average), although this may be partly explained by the fact that there was no neutral option for participants to choose. Deprived of this option, some students may have been reluctant to choose one of the two negative answers, which could also partly account for the fact that this category had the highest overall score at the end of the semester. Nevertheless, the fact that it did have the highest score (81.7% on average) suggests that the majority of students feel the course and its activities are of value, as illustrated by the following student comments:

*Regardless of how well I can speak English now, these lessons will definitely be useful for my future.*

*Through this class, I became to want to go abroad and speak English with foreign people.*

The vast majority of students also indicated that they felt more confident about speaking English (92.9%) and that they felt their fluency had improved (90.9%) by the end of the semester. This is reinforced by the following comments:

*Through Discussion Class I feel more familiar with English and that I can speak English more fluently.*

*Having eight class members is just the right size and ... I feel that my speaking ability has improved considerably.*

This study has not attempted to match those claims with empirical data regarding the students' output, but the fact that, in the eyes of the participants themselves, the course has been successful in its stated aim of improving students' fluency is a major validation of the EDC course.

## CONCLUSION

These results clearly indicate that Rikkyo University students felt considerably more positive about the EDC course, and its individual lesson activities, at the end of the Spring Semester than at the very beginning. However, they are based on the classes of only one instructor, therefore it would be interesting to see whether other classes produced similar results. In particular, a study that included Level Four participants would make it more representative of the student body as a whole. It would also be worthwhile to investigate the extent to which students' perceptions of their improvement matched empirical data regarding their actual performance.

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## APPENDIX A

## Student Questionnaire – Lesson 1

How do you *imagine* you will feel about doing the following things in English Discussion Class? Please circle the appropriate number.  
 ディスカッションクラスで今学期行うことについて、どのように感じると思いますか？今までの経験や想像で答えて下さい。該当する番号に○を付けて下さい。

- (a) Speaking English only for 90 minutes 英語で 90 分話す
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (b) Talking in pairs 2 人一組で話す
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (c) Talking in small groups (3-5 students) 少人数のグループ (3-5 名の学生) で話す
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (d) Speaking or answering a question in front of the whole class クラス全員の前で話すことや質問に答える
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (e) Speaking to a partner without stopping for 2-3 minutes 2-3 分間止まることなく、自分が話し続ける
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (f) Doing a speaking exam スピーキングテストを受ける
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (g) Listening to my classmates クラスメートの話を聞く
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (h) Listening to my teacher 先生の話聞く
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |

## New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion

### APPENDIX B

#### Student Questionnaire – Lesson 14

How do you feel now about doing the following things in English Discussion Class? Please circle the appropriate number.  
ディスカッションクラスで行うことについて、今どのように感じますか？該当する番号に○を付けて下さい。

- (b) Speaking English only for 90 minutes 英語で90分話す
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (b) Talking in pairs 2人一組で話す
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (c) Talking in small groups (3-5 students) 少人数のグループ(3-5名の学生)で話す
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (d) Speaking or answering a question in front of the whole class クラス全員の前で話すことや質問に答える
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (e) Speaking to a partner without stopping for 2-3 minutes 2-3分間止まることなく、自分が話し続ける
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (f) Doing a speaking exam スピーキングテストを受ける
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (g) Listening to my classmates クラスメートの話を聞く
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |
- (h) Listening to my teacher 先生の話聞く
- |                  |                      |  |                      |                        |
|------------------|----------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 very difficult | 2 a little difficult | 3 neither difficult nor easy (どちらでもない) | 4 not very difficult | 5 not difficult at all |
| 1 really enjoy   | 2 enjoy              | 3 neither enjoy nor dislike (どちらでもない)  | 4 dislike            | 5 hate                 |
| 1 very useful    | 2 useful             | 3 not very useful                      | 4 not useful at all  |                        |

Do you feel you can speak English more fluently now than at the beginning of the semester?

今学期の始めに比べたら、今のほうが流暢に英語で話せると思いますか？

- 1 strongly agree 2 agree 3 disagree 4 strongly disagree

Do you feel more confident about speaking English now than at the beginning of the semester?

今学期の始めに比べたら、英語で話すときに今のほうが自信がありますか？

- 1 strongly agree 2 agree 3 disagree 4 strongly disagree

Please write any additional comments you wish to make below, in either English or Japanese.

ほかにコメントがありましたら、下のボックスに記入してください。英語でも日本語でもいいです。